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Official Discourses of the Australian 'Welfare Cheat'

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Keywords: welfare fraud – critical discourse analysis – Australian welfare state – gender

Introduction

Double dipping welfare cheat: Anna ___ was a dishonest woman who gave no thought to her two young children when she ripped off social security for a second time (Tydd 2011:1).¹

This article explores discourses of the Australian ‘welfare cheat’ in press releases issued by Australian Government and Centrelink officials since 1997, the year in which Centrelink was established. The focus of analysis is on the moral and behavioural characteristics variously ascribed to the ‘welfare cheat’, and the extent to which this identity discursively links issues of gender, crime and welfare. As these press releases aim to generate media attention, this article also examines the extent to which official discourses of the ‘welfare cheat’, that is, the ‘official welfare cheat’, are reproduced by the media. Ultimately, this article seeks to explore the significance and function of the ‘welfare cheat’ identity and how this identity may help to legitimise the prosecution of women for this offence.

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¹ The surnames of welfare fraud offenders have been excluded to avoid re-identifying them in this article.

Focus on the gendered nature of the ‘welfare cheat’ is prompted by the fact that women in Australia represent approximately two-thirds of convicted welfare fraud offenders (Prenzler 2012). This is in stark contrast to the overrepresentation of male offenders across all crime categories, including fraud and deception-related offences (see AIC 2013; 2012; ALRC 2006). It is therefore necessary to explore the place of discourse in this picture: is there a connection between the discourse of the ‘welfare cheat’ and the reality that women are prosecuted for this offence at a peculiarly high rate compared to men? This is not to suggest that welfare fraud crime rates can be reduced to discourse. Rather, this inquiry is driven by a belief that discourse has performative power to not only reproduce, but also to constitute, the material world. The role of discourse in the production of this social reality thus deserves attention. In short, this article aims to make visible the ‘ideological work’ this discursive identity performs.

Indeed, while the discursive presentation of welfare fraud offenders is often gender neutral, there is a persistent and insidious line drawn between women, criminality and welfare dependence in many accounts of welfare fraud. The representation of Anna, ‘the double dipping welfare cheat’ in the opening quotation is exemplary. It links Anna’s criminality with suggestions of her incompetence as a mother; an insult reserved for women alone. Such characterisations of welfare fraud draw upon historical representations of ‘bad women’ as deceitful and selfish. But they also accord with contemporary neoliberal discourses of ‘personal responsibility’ for crime and unemployment. Ultimately, this combination of old and new discourses in the context of Australia’s contemporary punitive culture effectively qualifies women for this crime, and presents prosecution and punishment as the only logical responses to it.

Data and method

This study uses Norman Fairclough’s approach to critical discourse analysis (‘CDA’) (Fairclough 1999; 1995; 2003). Inspired by critical theory traditions, CDA takes the view that discourse is not a mere reflection of the social world; rather it both reproduces and constitutes the social world in a dialectical relationship (Fairclough 1995). Each instance of discourse is simultaneously a piece of text (written, spoken or visual), an instance of discursive practice (the processes of production, distribution and consumption of the text) and an instance of social practice (Fairclough 1999:ch 2). Critical discourse analysis seeks to fuse textual analysis with critical sociocultural analysis of social practices and structures, with the former providing ‘textual evidence’ for the latter (Fairclough 1995:2).

This current analysis focuses on media releases issued by Australian Government ministers and Centrelink officials on the topic of welfare fraud since July 1997. The first step in this examination is to conduct a ‘quantitative’ corpus analysis to explore the patterns that operate across these texts. Texts were coded by author, authors’ political affiliation, press release type, and the sex of ‘welfare cheats’ identified. It then explores the keywords and themes used to bring the ‘welfare cheat’ into view with focus on how this identity embodies issues of gender, poverty and crime. This corpus analysis is complemented by a close CDA analysis of a small selection of representative texts that explicitly identify the gender of welfare fraud offenders.

As these press releases aim to generate media coverage, the study also examines the extent to which the official ‘welfare cheat’ is represented in the Australian media, specifically the print media. Using distinctive keywords in these official press releases, primarily offenders’ full names, searches using *Factiva* have identified newspaper articles

that reproduce elements of press releases focused on individual cases of welfare fraud. The aim here is not to undertake a comprehensive examination of media discourses of the 'welfare cheat'; it is to examine the extent to which these official messages are reproduced, elaborated upon or challenged by the media. Ultimately, this study considers the influence and reach of this discursive identity and how it may legitimise and propel the criminalisation of women for this offence.

Contextualising discourses of the 'welfare cheat'

As Fairclough stresses, CDA seeks to augment rather than supplant other critical approaches to social science research, as these approaches provide the theoretical foundations for examining how texts figure in social practices. It is therefore essential to briefly examine the broad discursive and material shifts in the penal and welfare states that have enabled the 'welfare cheat' to take root.

Chunn and Gavigan's (2006) examination of the Ontarian approach to welfare fraud helps to elaborate a theory of how this crime simultaneously links poverty, gender, welfare and crime. Chunn and Gavigan conceptualise the official response to welfare fraud as a reformed mode of neoliberal moral regulation. They take up Hall's (1980) formulation of moral regulation, in which the moral project of normalising or rendering 'natural' premises that maintain the social order is 'situated expressly within the context of capitalist class relations and struggles' (Chunn and Gavigan 2006:221). For Chunn and Gavigan (2006:227), the neoliberal moral regulation of welfare fraud paradoxically involves an ideological decentring of the state, characterised by the erosion of redistributive welfare policies designed to alleviate poverty, alongside a 'massive redeployment' of the state's resources to condemn, regulate and punish the poor. Ultimately, the central effect of the material and discursive shifts towards neoliberalism has been the redrawing of age-old boundaries around the deserving and undeserving poor, so that '[f]ew people it seems, qualify as "deserving" poor anymore' (Chunn and Gavigan 2006:218). This has resulted in a shift 'from welfare fraud to welfare *as* fraud', tainting all recipients with criminal suspicion (Chunn and Gavigan 2006).

Wacquant's (2009) critical insights complement Chunn and Gavigan's scholarship by providing an analysis of the global reach of neoliberalism. For Wacquant, the welfare and penal states in the United States ('US') and (at least partially) in continental Europe have become increasingly punitive. These once ideologically and practically distinct state institutions are now '*run jointly* at ground level, by applying the same principles of deterrence, diversion, individualized supervision, and sanction' (2009:294). For Wacquant (2009:1), this synchronised 'punitive upsurge' is indicative of the global spread of neoliberalism spearheaded by the US. This much-contested term, 'neoliberalism', is theoretically aligned to the Chicago School of Economists and the ideas of Friedrich von Hayek, which fused classical liberal faith in the free market with a policy program designed to 'activate' markets. But as Wacquant (2009:306) stresses, to conceive of neoliberalism in narrow economic terms fails to acknowledge the 'institutional machinery and symbolic frames through which neoliberal tenets are being actualized'.

Neoliberalism is a 'transnational political project' (Wacquant 2009:306), spread by a network of conservative think tanks and global elites. The result of this neoliberalisation is a new form of 'liberal paternalism' in which corporations and the ruling class are met with deregulation, while the poor — and especially poor communities of colour — are met with authoritarian 'double-regulation' by punitive and moralistic workfare programs, on the one

hand, and criminalisation and punishment, on the other (Wacquant 2009:15). Thus, despite neoliberalism's small-state catchcry, the 'poverty of the social state against the backdrop of de-regulation elicits and necessitates the grandeur of the penal state' (Wacquant 2009:19).

As Wacquant (2009:307) explains, neoliberalisation is undergirded by 'the cultural trope of individual responsibility which invades all spheres of life', and has been successfully deployed by politicians on both the left and the right. This moralistic mantra embodies a behaviouristic mode of reasoning and assumes an ideal competitive, industrious, entrepreneurial citizen. It serves to dismiss sociological explanations for crime and unemployment as 'excuses', positing individual immorality as the cause of social ills (2009:8-9). This in turn strengthens the apparent suitability of the individualised responses of 'workfare' and its carceral counterpart, 'prisonfare'.

With Australia's increasing reliance on US policies and thinkers for policy inspiration, Wacquant's analysis of neoliberalisation has conceptual relevance for understanding discourses of the 'welfare cheat'. We too have experienced the waning of social welfare programs and labour regulations since the 1980s, and the subsequent rise of more punitive approaches to crime and welfare, albeit less dramatically than the US' experience of reform (Marston 2008; Mendes 2008). Since Centrelink's inception, a virtual police force has emerged within this welfare institution, comprising data analysts to detect payment 'discrepancies', 'fraud investigators' responsible for cash-economy operations, and contracts with private security companies to provide 'covert optical surveillance' of suspects (Prenzler 2012). Here, too, the line between welfare administration and policing is unclear.

But while Wacquant's approach offers a useful analytic framework for exploring the practical interlocking between penal and welfare states, his analysis cannot be accepted whole heartedly. In particular, it overlooks the diversity of local trends and the influence of local institutions, cultures and events on processes of reform. According to Brown (2011), this oversight results in the erroneous depiction of neoliberalism as a cohesive global phenomenon that has wholly superseded the rehabilitative and socially ameliorative goals of the Keynesian social state. He instead urges acknowledgment of the enduring hybridity in contemporary penal and welfare states: 'rather than being flattened, blown or washed away, social democracy and penal welfarism are partly submerged, reshaped, blended, reconfigured, hybridised, recalibrated' (Brown 2011:79). The vastly different rates of incarceration across Australia's eight jurisdictions are a case in point. Where the Northern Territory boasts some of the highest imprisonment rates in the world, Victoria exhibits 'Scandinavian-style restraint' (Baldry et al 2011:25).

Informed by this analysis, it is difficult to accept the sweeping nature of neoliberalisation or to assert the same level of orchestration between these institutions. In many respects, the Australian criminal justice landscape reflects what O'Malley (1999) terms a 'volatile and contradictory' New Right politics in which free market liberals and social conservatives are allied. This New Right alliance has come to dominate, but it has not wholly superseded Australia's version of Keynesianism. According to O'Malley, this uneasy New Right alliance results in a curious and often-conflicting combination of 'innovative' and 'nostalgic' political rationalities. Where 'innovative' neoliberal rationalities propelled the privatisation of prison services and the proliferation of schemes that seek to create 'enterprising prisoners', for example, 'nostalgic' neoconservative rationalities have led to a revalorisation of retributive punishments, including imprisonment.

This New Right bifurcation in crime control policy has to some extent been mirrored in Australian welfare policy and practice. In fact, even within Centrelink's anti-fraud bureaucracy, there is evidence of internal discord and incoherence. While many compliance

initiatives, such as prosecution, are patently retributive, others bear the hallmarks of neoliberal 'efficiency', and often result in less punitive outcomes. For example, data matching primarily focuses on identifying and recovering debt, and is largely unconcerned with identifying and punishing individual wrongdoing. Nevertheless, the general point remains: the administration of welfare in Australia is increasingly coercive and punitive and, ultimately, akin to policing.

Hybridity and conflict also feature in contemporary approaches to female offenders. Feminist criminologists have long demonstrated how women offenders have traditionally been cast as 'mad', 'bad', and 'as worse than any man', but largely in need of treatment and moral tutelage rather than incarceration (Davies 1999:53). And, despite Wacquant's thesis about the decline of leniency, feminists have documented the persistence of these characterisations of 'bad women' and 'softer' responses to their offending (Gelsthorpe 2005). This is not to suggest that women have escaped the popular punitiveness that has swept across the English-speaking world, strikingly evidenced by the explosion in women's imprisonment rates, a burden that has fallen most heavily on Indigenous women and other women of colour (see AIC 2013; Baldry et al 2011; Sudbury 2002). As Baldry et al (2011:290) suggest in relation to Australia: 'The extraordinary growth in women's imprisonment clearly reflects a changed environment in our cultural understanding of the appropriateness of gaol for women.' In Gelsthorpe's words, 'the treatment of women in the criminal justice system in general, and in prisons in particular, has continued to reflect a curious mixture of "hard" and "soft" measures — punishment and "re-education" or moral tutelage' (2010:380).

It is within this contemporary penal context — characterised by a renewed emphasis on retribution and coercion, yet still shaped by enduring Keynesian welfarist ideals, along with age-old gendered representations of 'bad women' — that the discourse of the 'welfare cheat' has taken root.

Discourses of the official welfare cheat

Informed by this critical literature the article will now explore the Australian 'welfare cheat' promulgated by government ministers and Centrelink officials. In total, 192 press releases were examined, representing all available releases on the topic of welfare fraud issued between July 1997 and July 2014. Of these, 41 were issued by Centrelink, most of them after 2004. A further 96 were authored by the former Department of Social Security and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services (and its previous incarnations). The remaining 55 were issued by the Department of Human Services ('DHS') after its establishment in October 2004, at which point it immediately eclipsed the other departments as the most frequent source of welfare fraud press releases.

These press releases can be divided into three groups. The first category comprises press releases that refer to the problem of welfare fraud in general terms only. The majority of ministerial releases fall into this category, but no Centrelink press releases. The second category centres on a successful Centrelink fraud operation, in which a defined group of 'welfare cheats' (Melbourne taxi drivers, for example) is identified. This includes 23 press releases issued by both ministers and Centrelink officials. The remaining 81 press releases focus on the imprisonment of individual perpetrators of welfare fraud.

Of market and morals: Official constructions of the problem welfare fraud

As proponents of CDA assert, the way in which policy actors define and describe policy problems performs ideological work (Marston 2000). In Marston's words, '[d]iscourse types are used [by policy actors] to strategically construct competing versions of a policy problem and employed to legitimate preferred policy solutions' (2000:350); thus, power is exercised by consent, rather than compulsion. Indeed, in the texts examined, the problem of welfare fraud is unanimously depicted as a costly crime committed by calculated, immoral individuals. In short, welfare fraud is constructed as a problem of 'market and morals', reflecting and strengthening New Right ideologies. Despite a change in government in 2007, there was no discernible difference between press releases issued during Liberal or Labor terms in office, reinforcing the arrival of an 'ideological convergence' between the major parties in respect of welfare fraud (Mendes 2008:121).

A joint release by former Labor Human Services Minister Tanya Plibersek and Minister for Home Affairs and Justice Brendan O'Connor (2011) states:

'It is disappointing that a minority of people seek to exploit the system that is designed to support people when they are having a tough time', Mr O'Connor said.

...

'Whilst most Centrelink customers are honest and are in genuine need of assistance, unfortunately some people attempt to take advantage of the system,' Ms Plibersek said.

This narrow characterisation of welfare crime as 'taking advantage' represents welfare fraud as nothing more than the work of morally deficient individuals who choose to take from the system to satisfy their own greed. Drawing on Bakhtin's theory of dialogicality, Fairclough examines how the presentation of just one version of the world in a 'taken-for-granted' manner silences divergent accounts and cements the dominance of the truth-claims put forward (Fairclough 2003:ch 3). In the texts examined, the deviancy and culpability of individual 'cheats' is assumed. This narrow individualised frame conceals the social causes of welfare fraud, and thus forecloses system reform as an appropriate policy response (Walsh and Marston 2008; Mosher 2010). In particular, the economic context of social security offending is absent in these texts, which removes the possibility of addressing poverty as a meaningful response to this crime. Welfare fraud is constructed as a classless crime committed by immoral individuals, and the detection and imprisonment of individual 'cheats' is posed as the only logical response.

The imprisonment of 'cheats' is actually presented as a self-evident win for public justice. As former Minister for Human Services Chris Ellison (2007) said in July 2007 in response to the gaoling of a 50-year-old woman for welfare fraud: 'This is a tremendous outcome for Australian taxpayers. It also sends a clear message to would be cheats — if you deliberately rip off the welfare system you will be caught, you will be brought to justice and you will have to pay back every cent.' Whatever the facts in this individual case, the assumption is typically that welfare cheating is deliberate and that imprisonment is appropriate. In this press release, so-called fraud compliance measures such as data-matching and optical surveillance are characterised as necessary tools for the pursuit of 'justice'. From this vantage point, it is 'self-evident' that this sort of public justice outweighs the inconvenience and intrusiveness of these measures upon welfare recipients. The construction of the problem of welfare fraud lends justification to the coercive regulation of welfare recipients more generally.

The regulation of welfare recipients is further reinforced by the repetitive advertisement of savings generated from 'compliance' measures, as indicated by the following press release headlines: 'Computers Identify \$Millions' (Anthony 1999); 'New Data Matching to Recover Millions in Welfare Dollars' (Plibersek 2011). As former Prime Minister John Howard explained, fraud compliance measures are 'eliminating waste in the welfare system' (Howard 1997). Implicit in this discourse of cost-saving is the assumption that a reduction in welfare spending is desirable, and that surveillance is an essential ingredient of responsible economic management. The neoliberal goal of economic efficiency in the welfare state is thus idealised. It takes precedence over, for example, the goal of poverty alleviation.

In fact, issues of poverty do not feature in the discussion at all unless to preclude 'cheats' from the status of being in need. 'Cheats' instead 'undermine the system and hurt those with genuine need' (Ludwig 2008). Indeed, this official construction of welfare fraud blames individual 'welfare cheats' for draining money from the welfare state. This is a point that Cruikshank (1999) puts forward to illustrate that welfare fraud administration has more to do with the disciplining of the welfare state than with the punishment of individual culprits. Ultimately, the propagation of official messages about welfare fraud serves to limit the Government's culpability for the failures of the welfare state more generally. The Government is simply judged on its ability to pursue savings for taxpayers and how forcefully it punishes individual 'cheats'.

The hypocrisy of this discourse of savings is made visible by the disproportionate focus on welfare fraud in comparison to the similar economic crime of tax evasion, particularly considering that savings garnered from tax compliance initiatives far outweigh those from welfare fraud compliance. This is a line of argument forcefully pursued by Cook (2006; 1997; 1989) in relation to the UK context. In Australia, too, it has been estimated that savings generated by measures to detect tax evasion amount to four times the savings generated by equivalent welfare fraud compliance measures (Thomson 2006). Yet tax evasion is subject to lower levels of surveillance and prosecution than welfare fraud (Martson and Henman 2008; Marriott 2013). This has led Greg Marston and Paul Henman (2008:197) to conclude that, '[c]learly, a moral rationale rather than an economic rationale drives the heightened level of surveillance dedicated to detecting and prosecuting welfare fraud'.

Ultimately, the strategic dissemination of anti-fraud messages by Government and Centrelink officials has ideological consequences. By framing welfare fraud as a problem of morality and a massive cost to the public, the surveillance of welfare recipients and the punishment of individual offenders are rendered appropriate and reasonable responses. It is within this context that the identity of the 'welfare cheat' and its discursive relationship between the Government and general public must be understood.

Villains, victims and heroes: The cast of characters in official welfare fraud press releases

Official press releases, and particularly the 23 that focus on fraud 'raids', establish a classic protagonist-antagonist relationship between the Government and 'welfare cheats' along the lines of a cops and robbers heist. The following press release is indicative:

Centrelink Catches Welfare Cheats in Cash Economy Operations

Minister for Human Services, Senator Joe Ludwig, said cash economy operations in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth should send a warning to Centrelink customers who fail to declare their earnings.

The successful operations identified dozens of Centrelink customers for investigation for earning cash in hand while receiving government benefits.

‘These raids could save Australian taxpayers more than \$215,000,’ Senator Ludwig said.

‘Centrelink has highly experienced Intelligence Analysts and Fraud Investigators able to detect suspected cases of fraud.’

‘Ripping off the welfare system by deliberately not declaring income to Centrelink will not be tolerated.’

‘While the vast majority of customers do the right thing there is a need for investigators to undertake these types of operations to catch those trying to rort the system’ (Ludwig 2009).

As this example illustrates, individual offenders are ‘cheats’ and ‘rorts’ — labels that accentuate the apparently calculated and deliberate nature of their fraud. The immorality of these individuals is reinforced by their repetitive characterisation as recipients ‘trying to rort the system’. Immoral ‘cheats’ are juxtaposed to Centrelink officials and the Minister, the apparent upholders of legal and moral order. Centrelink personnel are described as ‘Fraud Investigators’ who undertake ‘field operations’, ‘optical surveillance’ and use ‘sophisticated data-matching’ or set up ‘roadblocks’ to catch cheats. This presents Centrelink officials as a pseudo police force. Indeed, the assertion that this crime will ‘not be tolerated’ in this press release evokes the zero tolerance rhetoric most associated with tough street policing. It serves to infuse Centrelink staff with the characteristics of strength and hard-headedness, along with all the qualities expected of crime-fighting members of the actual police force. Here we can see a depiction of Centrelink, ostensibly an institution centred on the goal of poverty alleviation (or at the very least offering a social ‘safety net’ to its citizens), as an apparatus of surveillance and policing.

In these texts, the Government and, more specifically, the Human Services Ministry (and FaCS before it) is positioned as the moral overseer of both Centrelink fraud operations and taxpayers’ money. As former Minister for Community Services Larry Anthony (1999) declared: ‘This Government takes seriously its duty to ensure the integrity of the social security system.’ The term ‘integrity’ is used in these press releases as a synonym for payment accuracy. Yet, its repetitive use subtly triggers its alternative meaning, that is, adherence to moral principles, endowing the Government with this quality. This only serves to reinforce the moral uprightness of the Government in the face of immoral ‘cheats’ who have ‘breached’ the integrity of the system.

The Government and Centrelink are ostensibly protecting the ‘Australian taxpayer’, who is the victim in this story. This discursive victimisation of the taxpayer is achieved by condemning ‘welfare cheats’ for ‘rip[ping] off the system and their fellow Australians’ (Vanstone 2003a). Taxpayers are encouraged to feel ‘angered’ by the actions of ‘cheats’ and to join in the fight against fraud by calling the fraud tip-off line. Implicit in this identity of the ‘Australian taxpayer’ is the erroneous suggestion that ‘welfare cheats’ do not pay tax. It also entrenches an image of welfare fraud as ‘un-Australian’. This is reminiscent of Archer’s (2009) exploration of the Australian ‘dole bludger’ discourse in the 1970s, in which she suggests that a new ‘taxpayer-versus-welfare’ frame has been established that pits the worker as taxpayer against the parasitic ‘dole bludger’. Archer (2009) suggests that this frame facilitates acceptance of neo-liberal ‘common sense’, in which the welfare state is considered an intrusion on the rights of taxpayers. In a similar way, the representation of the taxpayer as victim in this discourse of the ‘welfare cheat’ functions to enforce boundaries

between 'us' (taxpayers) and 'them' (cheats), diminishing cross-class solidarity between the general public and the 'cheat', that unequivocally bad citizen who doesn't pay tax and lets down not just the Government, but also her 'fellow Australians'.

The exclusive use of the gendered pronoun 'her' is intentional here. More often than not, 'welfare cheats' in the official story of welfare fraud are women. Of the 110 'welfare cheats' whose gender is identified in these press releases, 71 (or approximately two-thirds) are identified as women. The disparity is starker when examining press releases that centre on individual 'cheats' alone, as opposed to press releases that include multiple fraud 'case studies'. Thirty-three (or three-quarters) of 'cheats' in these 44 releases are women. Where the public face of criminality is so often inscribed with maleness (Messerschmidt 1997), the official 'welfare cheat' is more likely to be inscribed as female.

Engendering the official 'welfare cheat'

The gendered features of the 'welfare cheat' become most visible in texts that centre on a single convicted welfare offender. The following examples are typical. The first was issued by former Liberal Minister for Family and Community Services Amanda Vanstone, and the second by Centrelink.

Slammer for Woman in \$140 000 Welfare Scam

A Melbourne Woman who rorted more than \$140 000 in welfare payments over 10 years was sentenced to two years prison, with a non-parole period of nine months, at the Melbourne County Court today.

Fiona S____, from Carrum Downs, pleaded guilty to falsely claiming Single Parent Payments even though she'd been married since November 1990 ... S____ told Centrelink she was single the whole time she was married from November 1990 to June 2000 ...

Australia has a generous and accessible welfare system but there are always going to be people who will take advantage of others for their own selfish reasons (Vanstone 2003b).

Welfare Fraud Tip Off Results in Jail Term

A public tip off has resulted in a Kallangur woman being jailed for 2 years after being convicted of a \$53,000 Centrelink fraud.

Sandra N____, 39, pleaded guilty in the Brisbane District Court to receiving Parenting Payment Single worth \$53,326 she wasn't entitled to between 2002 to 2007.

Evidence presented to the court revealed Ms N____ was a member of a couple for that period but continued to tell Centrelink she was a single parent. ...

Centrelink General Manager Hank Jongen says the public has a right to be angered by those who defraud the welfare system ...

'Australia's about giving people a fair go, and our welfare system gives people who are genuinely in need a safety net when they can't support themselves' (Centrelink 2010c).

Each 'welfare cheat' in these releases is discursively imbued with the qualities of greed and deceitfulness, while her crime of fraud is calculated and sophisticated. We learn that Fiona lied 'the whole time she was married', while Sandra's case is a public warning: 'if you commit welfare fraud, the system will catch up with you'. Fiona, like all 'cheats', is 'selfish'. This emerges in the description of the Australian welfare system as 'generous',

leaving her own selfish reasons as the only viable motivation for welfare offending. Ultimately, these two welfare cheats, like all those represented in these press releases, are discursively inscribed with a mixture of criminality, greed, selfishness and deceitfulness.

In these press releases, we are also provided with offenders' full names, age, gender, hometown, the plea and sentence; personal information we are not afforded in the more generalised welfare fraud press releases. This information serves to 'name and shame' these women (and men), who can be identified by neighbours, friends and colleagues. Yet what is most telling about these texts is not what they contain, but what they exclude. As Fairclough (2003:139) stresses, an examination of what is absent or 'backgrounded' in the text can reveal as much as, if not more than, exploring what is present and prominent in the text.

There is a glaring absence of any reference to mitigating or exculpatory circumstances that surround the offence, which are heard as a matter of course in sentencing proceedings. We hear nothing of whether these individuals experienced financial hardship, what they used the money for, or whether they have dependants. The absence of these personal circumstances is unsurprising. To include them would taint the unequivocal guilt that is necessary to maintain the story of justice communicated in these texts, and invite questions about the appropriateness of the punishments handed down to these 'cheats' and the official approach to welfare fraud more generally.

Significantly, the material conditions that surround welfare offending are obscured in these texts. This is despite the reality that welfare fraud offenders are also Centrelink 'customers'. In Australia's means-tested social security system, this ordinarily equates to being in financial difficulty if not abject poverty (ACOSS 2010), and financial necessity is cited as the primary motivation underpinning the crime of welfare fraud (Weatherley 1993; Marston and Walsh 2008; Hui 2011). Indeed, scholars have often characterised welfare fraud as a 'crime of survival', a symptom of an ailing welfare state coupled with an increasingly precarious labour market; a crime almost exclusively confined to the foot of the class structure (Kohler-Hausmann 2007). Yet, the 'welfare cheat' is discursively inscribed with greed rather than poverty, and thus the crime of welfare fraud is portrayed as classless. Obscuring class as a factor bolsters a neoliberal individualist theory of criminal action, suggesting that the crime was the free choice of a self-reliant and rational individual who simply chose to 'exploit the system'. Individual punishment is therefore presented as the only logical response to welfare offending by both male and female perpetrators.

Gendered deviance and the 'welfare cheat'

Feminist criminologists have long identified how traditional characterisations of women offenders are steeped in assumptions about women's 'nature'. Women's 'innate' qualities have served as explanations for the types of crimes that women commit (Comack 2006:58; Davies 1999). Of particular relevance is the common characterisation of 'bad women' as manipulative, deceitful, cold and calculated, and this explanation of women's deviance has long pervaded criminological theories. For example, the influential American criminologist Otto Pollak (1950) authored *The Criminality of Women* in 1950, in which he contended that all women are deceitful by nature. Women thus had a propensity to commit crimes of deceit, such as fraud and poisoning. The greedy and deceitful Australian 'welfare cheat' sits comfortably with this traditional characterisation of female offenders.

In a handful of press releases, female 'welfare cheats' are also imbued with subtle suggestions of sexual deviance. The examples above are indicative. They explain how these 'cheats' breached the so-called 'cohabitation rule' by failing to inform Centrelink about their relationships, a charge that is only levied against women in the official press releases

examined. Although these women's relationship status is presented in neutral terms, the inference that these women are hiding lovers might be seen to hint at their sexual immorality, a characteristic long connected with myths of 'bad women'. In any case, the point remains, it is only women who are represented as 'cohabiting' 'welfare cheats'. The (presumed) men who may have benefited from and perhaps even encouraged or coerced these frauds (see Braaf and Meyering 2011) are not mentioned.

There are a tiny number of press releases that more explicitly characterise 'welfare cheats' as promiscuous and lascivious women. For example, Centrelink's (2007) media release documented the success of 'Operation Mariana', which was part of a 'continuing investigation into Western Australia's skimpy barmaids and strippers':

Centrelink WA Business Integrity Manager Suzan Anthony said the investigation focuses on skimpy barmaids and strippers in metropolitan Perth and Kalgoorlie.

'Some of these customers are very clever and will go to extraordinary lengths to hide the fact they're earning an income at the same time as they are on a payment from Centrelink' [Ms Anthony said].

This press release is more overtly laced with gendered tropes. It smacks of age-old representations of 'bad women' as alluring, cunning and sexually devious; all characteristics assigned to the entrenched image of the female prostitute. As Hubbard (1998:55) asserts, 'the figure of the female prostitute has always constituted a central figure in the social imagination'. Both historically and presently the discourse of female sex workers 'has been constructed ... as a motif of degeneracy, contagion and sexual lasciviousness, and hence depicted as a threat to male bourgeois values' (Hubbard 1998:55). The seemingly incongruent use of the euphemism 'customers' alongside the sexualised label, 'skimpy barmaids', in this press release is a clear illustration of how these deeply gendered characterisations of 'welfare cheats' coexist with neoliberal individualist discourses. This discursive convergence renders the female 'welfare cheat' intelligible in the public imagination. While we are ready to identify criminality with maleness, the gendered discourse of the 'welfare cheat' forges connections between this crime and womanhood. It makes the prosecution of women for this crime more palatable and acceptable; perhaps even necessary for justice.

Media reproduction of the 'welfare cheat'

The influence of the 'welfare cheat' identity depends on mass media dissemination to reach the eyes and ears of the public. Official press releases are thus strategically crafted into tailor-made 'package[s] for media outlets and individual journalists' to appeal to the news media (Centrelink 2008:40). This process of media generation is neither unidirectional nor straightforward. Both the Government and media outlets have their own agendas, predilections and institutional constraints, which may or may not coalesce. Media outlets may reproduce, resist or simply ignore press releases about 'welfare cheats'. It is thus the aim of this article to examine the extent to which official messages about 'welfare cheats' reach the public intact.

Of the 86 official press releases centring on a single identifiable 'cheat', the media picked up 63, or approximately 75 per cent, and published 129 articles. The vast majority of the articles examined did not vary much from the official release text, and this was similar for local, state and national newspapers. The excerpts below are exemplary. The first is from a 2010 Centrelink press release, and the second is from an article in *The Mercury* (Hobart), which appeared two days later:

2 Northern Women Jailed for Centrelink Fraud

2 Northern Tasmanian women who fraudulently collected \$50,000 in Centrelink payments have been jailed this week. Tamara____, 32, from Legana pleaded guilty in the Launceston Magistrates Court to receiving Parenting Payment Single between 2006 and 2008, worth \$28,159, while living in a relationship' (Centrelink 2010a).

Jail for Benefit Cheats

TWO women were jailed this week for dishonestly claiming a total of more than \$50,000 off Centrelink. Tamara____, 32, of Legana, pleaded guilty in the Launceston Magistrates Court to defrauding the Commonwealth of \$28,159' (Glaetzer 2010:17)

But for the exclusion of one or two quotes from Centrelink's Hank Jongen, the remainder of the newspaper article neatly paraphrases the entire press release without reference to other sources. This example is not unique. Approximately 55 per cent of the 129 articles examined can be characterised as paraphrased reproductions.

Press releases about female 'welfare cheats' were more likely to generate media than those about male 'cheats'. Out of the 31 press releases that focus on women only, 23 (74 per cent) were reported in the media via 51 published articles. In comparison, 9 (64 per cent) of the 14 articles about men were picked up, leading to only 12 newspaper articles. Men were presented along the same lines as their female counterparts, as conniving, immoral 'cheats'. But it is much more likely that the official 'welfare cheat' who reaches the public via the mass media is female. The media ultimately facilitates the discursive link between welfare offending and women as perpetrators.

While the majority of newspaper articles examined simply reproduce official press releases, the remainder digress from the official script. These articles rely on other sources and offer additional details, and/or divergent approaches to the linguistic presentation of 'welfare cheats'. However, these media elaborations rarely challenge the central truth-claims put forward by officials. 'Cheats' are still constructed as calculated, deceitful and immoral, and deserving of their come-uppance. Frequently, however, these elaborated accounts of 'welfare cheats' cache this identity in more overtly gendered tropes.

Promiscuous 'welfare cheats' engaged in the adult services industry were the subject of significant media attention. This is perhaps unsurprising, considering sex has 'one of the most salient news values — especially in the tabloid press, but also to a significant degree in the broadsheets and other media' (Jewkes 2011:48). One article in the *Sunday Mail* explains how 'RAUNCHY-TALKING phone sex operators have defrauded Centrelink of more than \$300,000' (Cox 2006:9). The operation is described as an '18-month probe' that 'has uncovered 43 such female welfare cheats in Adelaide'; a phallic description that reinforces the masculine identity of the state against the feminised (and penetrated) 'cheat'. The only reference to sources other than official ones is to phone sex advertisements that 'offer customers the opportunity to eavesdrop in to all sounds and action' and offer steamy stories for people 'alone and frustrated'. This titillating account adds nothing of substance. It simply dramatises the (imagined) sexual lasciviousness of the alleged offenders.

Alongside promiscuous 'welfare cheats' there is a recurrent construction of 'cheats' as bad mothers. This was much more prevalent in newspaper articles than in official press releases, which presented these details in much plainer terms, if at all. Nevertheless, it was official press releases that sowed the seeds for media dramatisation of these 'cheating' mothers. As Jewkes (2011:135) suggests, the "bad mother" motif is so culturally pervasive

that it is ascribed to virtually *all* women, whether victims or offenders, actual mothers or non-mothers, and whether they are involved in the murder of children or commit other crimes but also happen to *be* mothers'.

In particular, the apparent immorality of single mothers receives inordinate attention in these articles. For example, the *The Daily Telegraph* reported that:

Criminals are laundering millions of dollars through poker machines each year. SINGLE mothers and pensioners crying poor to receive welfare benefits will be forced to repay \$9 million after they were found leading double lives as high-rolling gamblers (Viellaris 2011:32).

The peculiar capitalisation of the term 'single' in the middle of body text, whether or not deliberate, serves to highlight suspicions about these women as devious and immoral mothers. Here, single mothers are painted as outright criminals. The linguistic choice to label these women 'single mothers', which is absent in the press release and may not in fact be accurate, evokes deep-seated gendered prejudices. As Swain and Howe (1995) assert, the 'single mother' label is ingrained in the Australian imagination, evoking timeworn moral and economic meanings. For the authors, the label 'still equates with the teenage single mother who has children in order to abuse the welfare system' (Swain and Howe:3).

In one particularly sensational example, the headline 'JAIL FOR BOGUS BABY BONUS' appeared across the front page of the *Fraser Coast Chronicle* in bold capitals (Bryceloretta 2010:1). The story follows Bouvea, who 'claimed for a baby she never had and got caught' (Bryceloretta 2010:1). The fact that this woman has transgressed not only the criminal law, but has also exploited societal expectations that women will have children, is presented as abhorrent.

It is worth pausing to recognise that not all newspaper articles repeat the narrow story of the calculated and conniving 'welfare cheat'. Some of these articles, specifically four of the 129 examined, did not fit neatly within the official story of welfare fraud. An article in *The Courier Mail* (Oberhardt 2010:21), for example, draws on a Centrelink press release (2010b) to examine the case where 'A RESPECTED carer for the intellectually disabled was jailed ... for social security fraud'. The article's headline and initial paragraph stick to familiar territory, expressing dismay that Robyn, a 'respected carer' of disabled children (read: a 'good woman' fulfilling her natural gender role), could in fact commit a crime. However, this article also presents a much more complicated story:

At the time, Newton was caring for a daughter who was suffering from cystic fibrosis, [Robyn's barrister] said.

'I asked her how she spent the money and she said just trying to survive. None of it went on holidays or the like — it was spent on day-to-day expenses,' he said (Oberhardt 2010:21).

This powerful word 'survive' is perhaps the most exculpatory term in all the articles examined, for no one can disagree with the need to survive. It conflicts with the otherwise consistent construction of the wholly responsible, greedy, conniving 'cheat'. It humanises Robyn, perhaps also victimises her, as a struggling woman who couldn't handle the complexities of being a single mother and a paid worker. But this sympathetic tale is exceptional. Indeed, in another newspaper article about Robyn's case entitled 'Dole Fraudster Locked Up' (Roberts 2010), nothing was said of these explanatory circumstances. While there is scope for journalists to provide fuller or differing accounts of these cases of welfare fraud, they rarely did so.

Conclusion

As this examination has revealed, Australian Government and Centrelink officials have effectively disseminated a consistent image of a deceitful and selfish 'welfare cheat', wholly culpable for her crime. It is an image that conforms neatly to the pervasive trope of 'personal responsibility' for both crime and poverty. The media has picked up and reproduced the stories in these press releases, facilitating the spread of the official 'welfare cheat' identity. The vast majority of 'welfare cheats' in press releases and, even more so, in media articles are identified as women. This is in stark contrast to the underrepresentation of women in offending statistics generally and in popular representations of the criminal.

Unlike their male counterparts, female 'cheats' are additionally subject to high-pitched moral condemnations about their presumed sexual deviance, selfishness or maternal failings. This female 'welfare cheat' fuses the neoliberal mantra of 'personal responsibility', in which the 'cheat' is unambiguously culpable, with gendered assumptions about 'bad women'. By drawing on these already entrenched sexist notions of what deviant women are capable of in a manner that is compatible with predominant (neoliberal) assumptions about human behaviour, female 'welfare cheats' are made comprehensible, although still shocking. The discourse of the 'welfare cheat' effectively qualifies women for this crime in the public imagination.

It is time to turn full circle and revisit Anna, the 'dishonest woman who gave no thought to her two young children when she ripped off social security for a second time' (Tydd 2011:1). The construction of Anna as an incompetent and selfish yet 'personally responsible' mother in a generally punitive context creates a discursive environment in which prison is conceived of as an appropriate punishment for Anna, a mother with young children. Ultimately, the official discourse of the 'welfare cheat' has rendered the punishment of women for welfare fraud as legitimate, even routine, and necessary for justice. Indeed, for Anna, it would be considered unjust *not* to imprison her.

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